

# Marking the Victory in Ancient Greece: some Remarks on Classical Trophy Monuments

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## Abstract

Victory monuments played a vital role in the life of individuals and the civilisation as a whole in ancient Greece. They were an embodied celebration and memorial, both of a specific triumph and of military conflict as such, keeping alive the memory of past actions that would otherwise be forgotten. They carried a message of success both for the present era and for future generations, who thus found a focus in which to admire and honour the courage of their ancestors. The Greeks believed that just as the gods directed and influenced individual human lives, they also decided on the outcomes of conflicts and they therefore considered it their duty to give thanks to them. At first, they gave thanks immediately after a battle by erecting a tropaion on the battlefield, which from the time of the Greek-Persian Wars began to be built from more durable materials. A further gesture was made later by dedicating other weapons captured from the enemy to the gods either at a Pan-Hellenic sanctuary such as Delphi, Olympia or Isthmia, or at a local temple. This was an established custom that was supposed to ensure the support and favour of the gods in subsequent conflicts. Another custom was that a certain period after the end of a war, permanent monuments would be erected by the winning side away from the battlefield and dedicated to a specific god – either within the structure of the victorious polis or at a sanctuary.

**Key words:** antiquity; monument; tropaion; trophy; weapon;

## 1. Introduction

*Tropaia* are mentioned in the works of many ancient writers, though they are less interested in describing their appearance or method of construction than in employing them as a symbol of victory erected after every battle. They functioned as both a historic and religious monument, standing as a visible symbol of military success (Xen. Anab. 3.2.13). The erection of victory monuments emphasised supposed humanity's dependence on the assistance of the gods (Stroszeck 2004, 309). The monument became not just a celebration of a victory but also a votive offering (Phang et al. 2016, 567). In general, it took the form of the looted weapons and armour of the defeated enemy, which were hung or nailed to a tree trunk or a wooden post (Janssen 1957, 245; Woelcke 1911, 25-8). *Tropaia* would be arranged in the form of a figure, probably representing a victorious warrior or a deity assisting in battle. It would be built immediately after the end of a battle, on the battlefield (Diod. 14.24.4), usually at the point of first contact (Thuc. 2.92.5; 4.14.5; Xen. Hell. 4.2.23; 7.4.14; Xen. Anab. 6.5.32) or at the place where the defeated army turned to flee (Thuc. 4.124.4; Xen. Hell. 7.4.25; 7.5.13; Diod. 13.51.7). The word *tropaion* is thought to be derived from this moment, which was the battle's turning point (in Greek *tropê*), when one side achieved a decisive advantage over the other.

The origin and first appearance of *tropaia* is disputed. There is no record of the Greeks adopting the custom of building them from foreign ethnics (Janssen 1957, 242). In fact, the process operated the other way, as other nations, especially the Romans, adopted the Hellenic custom of erecting *tropaia*. They adopted the custom approximately in the third century B.C. Greek public monuments depicting real events (the paintings in the *Stoa Poikile*, the reliefs decorating the temple of Athena Nike in the Acropolis and many others) may have served as models for the historical reliefs of Roman artists. There is even clearer evidence of a lineage in the case of equestrian military monuments, which originated in the Late Classical art of Greece and gradually became a feature of Roman cities and temples (Nováková et al. 2018, 434-55). Researchers who have studied the construction of *tropaia* point to domestic, Greek factors whose roots reach back into the Dark and Archaic Ages. Some claim there is a connection between the later *tropaia* and the decorated "*Warrior-goddesses*," armed with

a shield, spear and a helmet of boar tusks that appear on frescoes, seals and rings from the Bronze Age (Rehak 1999, 227-39). Others link the construction of the first *tropaion* to the scene in Homer's *Iliad* in which Odysseus and Diomedes kill Dolon (Hom. Il. 10.465-68). They strip of his armour and hang it on a tamarisk bush, and then say a prayer to dedicate it to Athena, who helped them in battle. The resemblance is clear in terms of the hanging weapons and their placement at the scene of the victory, even though Homer never uses the word *tropaion* (Meineck and Konstan 2014, 173). Some theories link its origins to the Doric culture because the earliest example appears to come from Sparta in the eighth century B.C. (Paus. 3.2.6). From the middle of the fifth century B.C., *tropaia* begin to appear in art and literature, which indicates that their erection was common practice in the Classical period (Rouse 1902, 99).

## 2. Transformation into bronze and stone

Because they were made of materials that were subject to decay (Diod. 13.24.5), *tropaia* were temporary markers of victory, prestige or humiliation. They were most often dedicated to Zeus with the epithet *Tropaïos*, i.e. the one who had turned the battle in favour of the winning side. There was a rule that they could not be destroyed unless they had been erected illegitimately (Thuc. 8.24.1). Since they were untouchable, being consecrated to the divinity that had ensured the victory, they could not be repaired or removed when they decayed (Plut. Mor. 273d). They were left to decay naturally (Marks 2010, 4). A turning point in the history of *tropaia* came at the time of the Greek-Persian Wars. Because this was not a conflict in which Hellenes fought each other but against an external enemy who was endangering their freedom, it was unthinkable that their successes against their enemy should be commemorated by monuments that would easily decay. This is the origin of durable victory monuments designed to be a permanent reminder of the Greeks' victories over the barbarians (Vanderpool 1966, 105-6). They kept the tradition of building a traditional *tropaion* immediately after the battle but after a short time they replaced it with more durable materials such as stone or bronze.

The change of building material transformed the meaning of the monument, which was no longer just a memorial of a past victory but a source of inspiration for future efforts and an icon of national identity (Marks 2010, 14). A victory monument could have any form, but most took

the form of a column (Marathon, Salamis, Psyttaleia, and Plataea) or a building (Megara, Athens, Leuctra). In the antiquity, these monuments were referred to by the same term – *tropaion*. They could be found on the battlefield in the close vicinity of a town (Marathon, Plataea), within a settlement (Argos, Athens, Leuctra, Ephesus, Rhodes), in a visible location such as on a hilltop (Megara), by a road (Megara), on the border of a territory (Megara) or close to sanctuaries (Delphi, Olympia, Mantinea). Monuments to sea battles were built at the closest point on the shore, e.g. Salamis or Psyttaleia (Thuc. 7.23.4; Xen. Hell. 5.4.66; Diod. 13.40.6; conf. Stroszeck 2004, 314-15). They are considered to be public monuments because their construction was usually supported by a community (usually *polis*) rather than the work of individuals. Their form, size and appearance expressed the common feelings of the community about the event they commemorated (West 2009, 7). Hellenistic decrees dating from the second or first century B.C. mention how every year on the anniversary of the Battle of Salamis (the 16th day of the month of *Mounichion*), the Athenian *ephebes* collectively organised a visit to Salamis to make a sacrifice to *Zeus Tropaios* (West 1969, 16).

### 3. Archaeology and written sources

Evidence of the construction of *tropaia* can be found in vase paintings (Janssen 1957, 61; Studniczka 1898, 21; Beazley and Caskey 1963, 66-7), reliefs (Kekulé 1881, 13; Sybel 1881, 396), engraved gems and coins (Furtwängler 1889, 204; Head 1887, 457), although the number of representations is not large. In iconography, the *tropaia* are shown alone or flanked by figures. In the Classical period, a victory monument appeared in the centre of a scene of battle close to the victor, who was either erecting the *tropaion* or standing next it, and occasionally not far from a depiction of the killing of prisoners (Janssen 1957, 246). The association of the *tropaion* with the figure of Nike dates from the fifth century B.C. This is based on the fact that in Greek mythology, Nike figured as the goddess who brought or guaranteed victory. She initially appeared as a companion to other divine figures, but she gradually took on increasing importance. In most cases, she appears as a standing goddess assisting in the construction of the *tropaion*, sometimes with a hammer in hand. Another common pose was crowning the monument with ribbons or a wreath. Some coins replace the goddess of victory with Heracles or, less frequently, Pan (Woelcke 1911, 38).

A victory monument was constructed at the end of almost every conflict between the individual Greek states. There was an unwritten rule that when one Greek *polis* defeated another, they could only build a transitory *tropaion* (Cic. Inv. 2.69), so that there was no permanent reminder of defeat that could serve as a cause of future conflicts. Furthermore, a non-permanent monument was a reminder of the ephemerality of military success (Stroszeck 2004, 312). Similar monuments were built during the Peloponnesian War. There are exceptions in the written and archaeological record, where a permanent monument was built after a victory in the Greeks' internal conflicts, e.g. the case of Megara (Stroszeck 2004, 326-28), Delphi (Diod. 11.14.4.; conf. Duffy 2016, 557-58), Argos, Olympia (Paus. 5.27.11; 6.2.8), Ephesus, Athens (Mallwitz 1983, 117), Leuctra (Osborne 2003, 151), Rhodes (Vitr. 2.8.15; conf. Stroszeck 2004, 319), Mantinea (Paus. 8.10.5). As part of their fratricidal series of conflicts, the mainland Greeks got into conflict with the city states of Sicily. Both Thucydides and Diodorus Siculus report that *tropaia* were built during the campaigns of 421–413 B.C. by both the Athenians (Thuc. 4.25.11; 6.94.2; 6.97.5; 6.98.4; 6.103.1; 7.5.3; 7.23.4; Diod. 13.9.6) and the Syracusans (Thuc. 7.24.1; 7.41.4; 7.45.1; 7.54.1; 7.72.1; Diod. 13.9.6; 13.19.3). Ancient writers also attest to *tropaia* on the west coast of Anatolia, but these were built by the Athenians (Thuc. 8.24.1; 8.25.5; Diod. 11.61.7; 13.40.6; 13.51.7) or the Spartans (Thuc. 8.42.4; Xen. Hell. 1.5.14; Diod. 13.78.5) rather than the local inhabitants (Greek or non-Greek). The Macedonians represent a special case because they knew of the Greek custom of building *tropaia* but believed, according to legend that they had been forbidden to build them. Pausanias tells the story that after the Macedonian king Caranus defeated a neighbouring ruler Cisseus, he erected a *tropaion* to celebrate his victory, but it was knocked down by a lion from Olympus (Paus. 9.40.8). As a result, no subsequent Macedonian ruler established any *tropaion*, and even Alexander the Great maintained this tradition (Woelcke 1911, 20).

Away from the battlefield, victories were commemorated by various architectural and artistic works, often made using the spoils (*laphyra*) taken in the commemorated campaign. Although war was a disturbing and traumatic experience for everyone, its negative effects were partially compensated by a victory. It brought the victorious state not only political power, supremacy and prosperity but above all plunder and wealth in the form of money, weapons or land. The spoils of war could be used to finance the construction or repair of temples, public buildings, altars,

columns (Rouse 1902, 100), or the production of sculptures or paintings of the gods or animals (Pritchett 1974, 240-41). Material objects were complemented by a system of sacrifices and rites or regular festivals. These were thus monuments that played an important role in the life of the whole community because they functioned, like a *tropaion*, to recall the victory and remind future generations of its glory and the courage of those who achieved it (Meineck and Konstan 2014, 174).

#### 4. Sacrifices of weapons

As part of a battle winner's thanksgiving for divine assistance, a part of the captured weaponry would be incorporated into the *tropaion* erected on the battlefield immediately after the victory and another part would later be sent to a Panhellenic or local sanctuary. This was an established custom based on a long tradition in ancient Greece that was thought to ensure divine favour and support in future conflicts (Duffy 2016, 515-16). In the *Homeric epic*, captured weapons represented not only a triumph but all the values and virtues required of a victorious warrior in this epic framework (Hom. Il. 7.82, Hom. Il. 10.460). Spoils of war in the form of weapons were a declaration and memorial of a hero's success in conflict. Unlike a *tropaion*, however, they did not function as a declaration of a collective victory in a particular battle (Meineck and Konstan 2014, 173). It is no accident that ancient Greek and Roman historians highlighted the rare moments in armed conflict when two leaders faced each other in life or death combat. Removing an enemy's armour after killing them was proof of absolute supremacy and such armour was often considered the most valuable votive offering. This phenomenon is not limited to the ancient Greeks and similar views regarding the sacrifice of weapons can be found amongst the Celts and Germans.

The phenomenon of victors consecrating captured enemy weapons and armour in buildings dedicated to particular gods first appeared in the Greek world in the eighth century B.C. and remained a frequent practice approximately until the fifth century B.C. Votive offerings of weapons and armour to Greek sanctuaries after various conflicts are reported by several ancient writers (Thuc. 3.101.2., Paus. 6.19.4., 10.11.6., 5.10.4, 9.16.5, 1.15.4, Hdt. 8.27.4). Donations were most often made to cult sites that had acquired more than regional significance since the end of the Dark Ages and become Pan-Hellenic sanctuaries – Olympia, Delphi, Isthmia and

Nemea. In the fifth century B.C., weapons and armour were increasingly donated to local shrines. The change could be associated with the different social composition of Classical armies (a higher proportion of non-aristocrats) and the reduced quantity of bronze used in armour (Brouwers 2010, 58-61). From the sixth century B.C., offerings have dedication texts that provide information on the donor, though in a somewhat laconic form. Most identify a particular *polis* and declare success in battle against another Greek community or a “barbarian” nation as the reason for the offering. The names of individuals appear only sporadically, and it is sometimes unclear whether it is the donor’s name (Baitinger 2016, 247-53).

### 5. Sepulchral and victory monuments

Battles in which the ancient Greeks were able to face and even defeat more numerous, organised enemies were recognised as an enormous success for the whole country. As a result, they greatly honoured these important and decisive triumphs and built permanent victory monuments to celebrate them. The graves of warriors and generals who fell in battle built close to victory monuments on the battlefield played a special role (Paus. 1.29.4; conf. Stroszeck 2004, 317). On the plain of Marathon, not far from the celebratory monument, there were burial mounds for Athenians and Plataeans and the grave of general Miltiades (Paus. 1.32.3-5). Archaeological evidence supplementing written testimony has confirmed that the “soros” at Marathon was really the grave of warriors killed in the Battle of Marathon (Sojc 2011, 3-4, Whitley 1994, 213-30). The list of those who fell at Marathon, which is mentioned by Pausanias (Paus. 1.32.3), was probably preserved in the form of a funeral stele found at the villa of Herodes Atticus in Kynouria in the northern Peloponnese (Duffy 2016, 401-3). The epigram, which is mentioned by Lycurgus (Lyc. 1 109), may have been placed not only at the burial mound at Marathon but also in the *Stoa Poikile* (West 1969, 6).

A great tumulus was built close to the monument celebrating the victory at Salamis at the highest point in the northern part of the Kynosoura Peninsula (Stroszeck 2004, 317). An inscription from the first century B.C. concerning the reconstruction of sanctuaries in Attica mentions the grave of Themistocles and a *polyandrion* on the island (Culley 1975, 207-23; Duffy 2016, 465-66). Since the leading general of the conflict with the Persians in 480 B.C., Themistocles and Eurybiades, had not died in those battles but

later, their graves were not built on the battlefield. The Athenian *strategos* Themistocles died in 460 B.C. at Magnesia on the Meander but his remains were brought back to Athens and he was allegedly buried not far from the harbour at Pireus (Plut. Them. 32.5). The grave of Eurybiades, the overall commander of the navy, was at Sparta (Paus. 3.16.6). The partially preserved inscription may be related to the burial of Corinthians who died at the Battle of Salamis on the island (Plut. De Herod. 870e; conf. Duffy 2016, 463-64). As in the previous cases, those who fell in the Battle of Plataea were buried on the battlefield close to the victory monument. Ancient writers record three mounds for the Spartans and other separate ones for the rest (Hdt. 9.85.1-3). The Athenian mound was supposed to be marked with elegiac verses by Simonides (Anth. Gr. 7.251).

Pausanias mentions graves built beside the road leading into the town but identifies only the separate *tumuli* of the Spartans and Athenians (Paus. 9.2.5; conf. West 1969, 34). Archaeological research has so far failed to find unambiguous evidence of them (Duffy 2016, 486-87, Leake 1835, 366-67). Ancient writers often mention annual sacrifices to the fallen (Thuc. 3.58.4, Plut. Arist. 21.2-5). Plutarch quotes verses commemorating the Corinthians who fell in the Battle of Plataea that may have marked their grave (Plut. De Herod. 872d-e). Herodotus does not mention a burial mound for Corinthian soldiers at the battlefield at Plataea. However, there is a possibility that an empty tomb, cenotaph, was built at the site of the battle at a later date and the commemorative verses were inscribed there (Duffy 2016, 484). A preserved epitaph (Anth. Gr. 7.512), possibly dating from the fifth century B.C., probably comes from the battlefield, from a stele marking the grave of the fallen Tegeans (Duffy 2016, 485). The epitaph's reference the burning of Tegea may be associated a battle, most probably the Battle of Plataea, when the city was threatened with fire. The courageous men had saved the city by laying down their lives in battle (Page 1981, 278).

## 6. Conclusion

*Tropaia* served as ephemeral signs of victory and defeat erected immediately at the end of a battle using the weapons captured from the enemy, which were hung up or nailed on a wooden frame in a shape resembling a warrior. The first permanent monument was built after the victory at Marathon. It marked the transition from a simple *tropaion* to a



fixed monument with a new message, not just about a past victory but above all a message of inspiration for future efforts and the development of a national identity. It had the form of a single Ionian column made of Pentelic marble at the top of which was probably a *tropaion* dedicated to the goddess Niké. This served as the model for victory monuments built after naval battles on Salamis and Psyttaleia, and the monument to the Battle of Plataea, which probably had the same form. In later times, victory monuments were also built to mark triumphs in conflicts between the Greeks, at Megara, at Athens and near Leuctra, which took the form of simple buildings. Besides references in the works of ancient writers and epigraphs, these monuments have been at least partially confirmed by archaeological finds.

The study has been completed within project supported by the Slovak Grant Agency: VEGA 2/0146/18.

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